

A Study of the Comedies of Richard Brome

Especially as Representative of
Dramatic Decadence

BY

HERBERT F. ALLEN

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the Department
of Literature, Science, and the Arts,
of the University of Michigan
for the

DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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OUTLINE.

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2¹. Body of Thesis.

1². Conditions precedent to literary decadence.

2². Characteristics of literary decadence.

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We shall attempt to show: first, what is meant by the term "decadent," and what the characteristic qualities of dramatic decadence are; second, that the comedies of Richard Brome show, in greater or less degree, all these qualities, and may be justly said to illustrate dramatic decadence.

A STUDY OF THE COMEDIES OF RICHARD BROME

ESPECIALLY AS REPRESENTATIVE OF
DRAMATIC DECADENCE

The word "decadent," according to the Century Dictionary, signifies a "falling away," "decaying," "deteriorating." It is not surprising, in view of the general character of these terms, that at least two standpoints are taken as to what should be considered decadent in literature. One group of men hold that the term should be applied to all writers in a period which shows a decline from a high standard attained immediately preceding this decline. Those who hold this view say that Ben Jonson, Webster, Middleton, and most of their contemporaries are decadent dramatists, because their work certainly shows a falling away from the standard of Shakespeare. When thus used the word decadent carries with it nothing, or at least very little, that is derogatory. It does, to be sure, imply that a period has not remained at the very highest point, and, usually, that any author of such an age is at least a little below the highest, but it suggests nothing more. A writer to whom the term is thus applied may be, and often is, of greater value than many to whom the term is not applied because their work was produced when the literary movement was rising rather than declining. For example, Jonson is unquestionably a greater figure than any contemporary or predecessor of Shakespeare in the drama, with the possible exception of Marlowe.

Decadent used in the other and more common sense does carry with it a significance decidedly opprobrious and condemnatory. It implies that the traits characteristic of decadence have become so predominant that they have destroyed the harmony essential to any work of real art, have produced results unwholesome rather than wholesome, that the literature to which the term is thus applied bears the same relation to normal

literature which a diseased or decaying body bears to one which is healthy and normal.

As the question is one of relative values, there can be no clear or exact line drawn between the first and second class. The qualities which are the cause of our condemnation of works falling under the second classification are ordinarily present in works of the first kind, but in somewhat different proportion or connection. The second and narrower meaning of the term is the one which is usually understood when it is applied to schools or periods; it is the one Saintsbury has in mind when he says that Massinger and Ford are the earliest of decadent writers following Shakespeare, and names the year 1620 as the one which showed that a change was clearly under way. It is plain that a period decadent in the second sense must be in the first sense also; that is, the first is the larger and most inclusive use of the term, the second the narrower and more definite. I shall use the word in the more restricted sense, because it is more definite in its implications, and because it can be applied in this sense as well as in the looser one to the works of Richard Brome.

It is a commonplace of criticism that the literature of any period is, in large part, the reflex of the people of that period; is therefore formed or influenced by the political, social and religious conditions of the time. As no two periods are exactly alike in the way these elements are united, it follows that the literature of no two periods to which we can apply the term decadent will be exactly alike. But as the elements of popular life are practically the same at all periods, and differ only in the relative importance and in the manner in which they are related, so the elements present in any decaying literature are apparently the same whenever that period occurs, but show at one time one element more conspicuously, at another time a different one. We will first consider what these elements are, then try to point out which of these was most important in the age we are to deal with, and to suggest the reasons therefor.

One of the most prominent characteristic of decaying literature is strained or forced "originality." This last word needs explanation. The author of the *Biographia Dramatica*, speaking of Brome says: "His plots are all his own"; yet Ward tells us, "Originality was by no means the note of honest Dick Brome." W. T. Price says, "Originality is usually but another name for artificiality, marking the point of departure from simple nature and every day life.¹ No one would dream of saying that Shakespeare's plots "are all his own"; in fact Schelling tells us that "*Love's Labor's Lost*" is the only one of Shakespeare's works for whose plot the author was really responsible; yet we look upon him as being one of the most original of authors. The confusion is the result of the double use of the word. The creator of Falstaff and Cordelia and the inventor of the last ingeniously complex short-story are both said to be "very original." In one case we see the result of what appears to be a free creative impulse, in the other the outcome of labored contrivance. The difference is nearly the same as that between creation and invention. The first is the distinguishing mark of a great epoch, the second one of the traits of a declining one.

The reasons for this are not far to seek. The glory and often wealth which are the rewards of the great authors inevitably attract many men of talent who, had not such brilliant examples of literary success been immediately before their eyes, would have turned their energies in some other direction. These men, feeling or finding that strong creative power is not theirs, turn involuntarily to some other means of attracting attention and winning popular applause. The surest method in such a period is the presentation of something unique. This is especially true of the drama, which must appeal constantly and directly to the people. The stock of plots and the range of incident is soon exhausted, and after a time even though the plot is adorned by poetic expression and made living by vital characters the ever-living desire for novelty and change becomes insistent. This demand for matters new

¹"The Technique of the Drama," pp. 12-13.

and strange was bound to be made very soon by the Elizabethan, prone as he always was to excitement and action, full of that curiosity as to many things which was his heritage from the Renaissance.

The really great poet, keeping true to the higher reality, may for a time control such a demand by the magic of genius or the power of his name; he may be ignored by the people, and live to see new idols apparently take his place. The new author, often not a genius, and if he is working in an environment comparatively less helpful to the growth of poetic power, is likely to consult at once his own capacity and the popular desire, and spend his energy in efforts to startle by strangeness; or to interest minds somewhat weary of contemplating eternal law by propounding the darker and more doubtful riddles of life to which one can hardly return an answer, from which the really healthy mind usually turns away. This is one explanation of such works as "'Tis Pity She's a Whore," "The Broken Heart," and "The Revenger's Tragedy."

A poet who is not gifted with an exquisite sense of the harmony of things, of the real truth and sanity of life, or who gives himself up to clever invention and exaggeration, is almost without restraint, and is almost certain to go farther and farther afield. If his invention fails or his conscience at last intervenes, there are always others to take up his work and carry it on. It is the same with a people who have become accustomed to such plays. They demand that the fantastic be more and more grotesque, the awful more horrible, the odd continually more peculiar. Thus author and audience encourage each other to destruction. The twenty-five years following the death of Shakespeare marks such an accelerating movement in certain lines.

The appearance of strain and artificiality in plot, theme and incident which often results from the feverish effort to furnish something new, is paralleled in the characters and setting. The dramatist devoted primarily to invention is likely, it is true, to be somewhat careless as to his characters, to use

the time-worn types with little change, and to give them no individuality; but it is certain to occur to him at length that the desire for the odd or abnormal can be gratified as well in characters as in plot. Moreover, his plots will at times imperiously demand impossible or terrible characters, in order that the action may be carried on with any appearance of plausibility. The close connection existing between style and content, plot and character, makes it always probable that a fundamental strength or weakness which affects one element will have some influence on the others. The characters may be merely peculiar or freakish, as we find them in Dickens for instance, or they may be gross exaggerations of good or evil. The first class is more frequent and less objectionable, indeed often amusing in a way, in comedy; the second finds its place in tragedy. Such monsters as the father in "The Unnatural Combat," who kills his son and has a guilty passion for his daughter, and Ford's terrible heroine, Annabella,² are equalled by such grotesque prodigies of virtue as Calantha³ and Dorothea.⁴ Where plot and characters are alike forced and fantastic, the whole atmosphere of the play is usually mephitic. It is not to be denied that plays of this character may be, and often are, very powerful. There are plays of Ford and Webster which grip the feelings as terribly as anything in literature. The trouble is they merely move and excite. The exaltation which should result from the contemplation of a great work of art, which should follow the "pity and fear" aroused by great tragedy, does not come. The man is apt rather to be more confused, less harmonious, less conscious of the real values of life than before. The feelings are moved but the intellect is not convinced, the will is not stirred to action.

It is not, of course, asserted that this characterization applies to all the plays of the period. In many of them this

² In "'Tis Pity She's a Whore."

³ In Ford's "The Broken Heart."

⁴ In Massenger's "The Virgin Martyr."

tendency toward the diseased is shown only in an occasional scene or character, or in an inclination to brood upon the illicit or unclean. In many the tendency is not discernible. It is, nevertheless, one of the distinguishing marks of the period,—something which one learns to expect, if not to take for granted.

Imitation is often said to be a distinguishing mark of a period of literary decadence. This is true if taken in the right sense. If mere bold imitation,—which is borrowing, disguised thinly or not at all,—is what one has in mind, then it can be said at once, I think, that it is not especially characteristic of such a period. The greatest poets have ever been noted for the frank and open way in which they have taken their own wherever they have found it. Milton imitated with loving care the epic forms consecrated by Homer and Virgil. Shakespeare in his plots did not always even take the trouble to imitate the plots of others and often threw the magic of his poetry over the structure left him by history. Ben Jonson's plays sometimes seem merely a marvelous mosaic of scenes, characters, even speeches, from Plautus, Terence, Horace, Virgil and many another. One of the most fascinating of literary studies is to trace such a story as that of Tristan and Isolde, or Troilus and Cressida, or Romeo and Juliet down through the ages, to see how it was treated by poet after poet, how little was added by each, and yet how, by subtle touches, each true poet made it his own and gave it a new and different power and value. But nothing is more fatal to a writer who is not a great or true poet than this kind of imitation. The strength of the material, the associations which it suggests, demand strength, energy, creative power; if this is not at hand the material remains unchanged, the larceny stands confessed and unexcused.

It may be, as has sometimes been suggested, that there is a sort of implicit antipathy between the power which loves to create plot, incident, typical characters,—the things which can be easily imitated,—and the power which delights to lose itself in the creation of characters which are individual, the

expression of enduring ideas, the singing of songs whose witchery is as deathless as it is inimitable. It is more probable that men possessed of this creative power feel that the more inventive activity is less important, and do not care to task their genius with both when in the less important part they can avail themselves of the labors of other men who have long been dead or who can not or do not care to do the more difficult work.

To the average uncultivated or superficially cultivated mind the "plot's the thing,"—it is the touchstone, that by which the story or play stands or falls. If characters or style is taken into account, it is for the broader, coarser, more obvious features. For the delicate shading of character, the jewel-like perfection of scenes or acts, for haunting rhythm, the qualities which differentiate the great play or poem from the commonplace production, the man in the street, or the boy in the gallery cares little. The perception of these beauties demands both a trained mind and some study. Neither boy nor man has the former; the study he has not time to give, even if he wished to do so. But the ordinary man is quick to condemn the play or story whose plot or characterization, in the more obvious lines, seems to him similar or identical with the same features in some other story or play. Never is he more naïvely charmed with his own sagacity and discernment than he is when he detects some writer, great or small, in this act of apparent theft. There are many reasons for this. If a man cannot *see* the real though less obvious marks of differentiation, for him the two stories or plays may be wonderfully, suspiciously alike. We all have, too, a certain pleasure in detecting likenesses, in solving riddles. We have also, it must be confessed, a sneaking pleasure in discovering another in wrong doing, especially if we think that he is trying hard to remain undiscovered, to deceive the world, including our acute selves. For the writer, then, especially the playwright, who must depend for his success upon the general public, it is very necessary that he shall not be, at least openly, imitative in those

broad and conspicuous features which it is the easiest to imitate as well as to detect. He must be at least superficially original, however little real originality he has. If he can bring a horse race upon the stage, as was done, it is said, in the production of Shirley's "Hyde Park," have real mermaids dive into a tank, or exhibit a death scene in a submarine boat, great indeed is his reward.

The writer, then, anxious for applause, who knows his public and is wise in his generation, imitates far too subtly to be easily discovered.

A well known buyer of short stories advises those who desire to write fiction of this kind to prepare themselves for each story in a very definite way. The writer should first get clearly in mind the kind of story he wishes to write, and, ordinarily, the magazine, at least the type of magazine, to which he wishes to sell it. Then, if he wishes to write a Munsey story, let us say, let him read Munsey stories until he is thoroughly saturated with the plots, characters, style, of this kind of story. When this point is reached the story he writes is likely to be after the fashion of those he has just read. With practice a man fairly gifted with this peculiar power of absorption can turn out stories of almost any kind, if he has a reasonable amount of time for preparation. It is true that literature of any high grade is rarely produced in this way, but, on the other hand, work that is at least salable is very likely to result. The method is a fairly safe one. It is sometimes practically forced on the writer by the insistence of the magazine or of the public on work of a certain kind. Most authors must adapt themselves to public demands; only the genius, and often not even he, can force the public to accept what he thinks best to give;—only the man of wealth can wait. The habit of writing in this fashion, like all other habits, has its reward and exacts its penalty; the easier it becomes to write in this way, the less able is the writer to depend on any creative power which he may once have had. The number of men who can do this kind of work

is astonishingly large. If the dialect story comes into vogue, we soon see an army of stories of this kind written by men who can do the work passably well. The same thing seems to have been true among the playwrights of the age of Shakespeare and of the decades following his death. Let the Fortune produce a very successful play of a certain kind and in a few weeks, perhaps even days, its rivals showed something surprisingly like it. Shirley was famed for this ability to take a successful play and, without imitating it directly, produce another startlingly similar.

Of course care must be taken that the watchful reader or auditor cannot see any direct imitation; but this matter in part takes care of itself automatically. The characters at once tend to become very generalized types and, denuded of any characterizing marks, become like not one other character, but like a vast number of others. The plot becomes similarly generalized; the incidents given have been used before by many writers. In essentials the story has been told before numberless times. How, then, shall the reader or onlooker be amused? The writer before referred to tells us at once: something original must be given. If the story has become wearisome, put it in a new environment, locate it in a submarine boat or an air-ship, in Patagonia or Timbuctoo; if the comic character has been an aunt, make it an uncle or a servant. By some such means one can gain, at least in the minds of the less thoughtful, the reputation for being decently original when really entirely imitative. It is hard to see how such a condition of affairs can be avoided, particularly in an age ever demanding what is new or seems so. When Shakespeare and Jonson wrote the long runs of modern theatres were unknown; every week or two a new play must be had. Of course old plays which had succeeded could occasionally be presented again; but with an audience which went to a play much as many of us read novels today, for the sake of the story, this could not be done frequently. Moreover, plays were in that day read as we read

stories, as may be seen by the tricks used to get plays successful on the stage for pirated publication. When they were once published and curiosity could be easily satisfied, further presentation on the stage was not likely for some time to prove profitable. Under such circumstances it is in no way surprising that absorption and assimilation should take the place of creative work.

When such incessant demands are made another result is often seen. A man who makes a success in a certain particular way, with a play or novel of a certain variety, is tempted, especially if his talent is limited or not easily bent to various forms, to try to repeat his success with more plays or stories which are little different from his first effort. Every year we see books of this kind, the thirtieth novel which is so little different from its twenty-nine predecessors. The fact of stage presentation to a mixed audience makes this kind of repetition, or self-absorption, less safe or common with the play than with the novel, because the latter may appeal to a small but certain audience. Some of the playwrights of the period under discussion, notably Brome and Shirley, did, nevertheless, show this trait of self-repetition to a marked degree.

The imitation which is the result or attendant of absorption may be, and often is, entirely unconscious. The man who is dowered with a mind fitted for doing it, and who constantly reads fiction or sees plays, can hardly help producing what he has taken in, though in a form which seems perhaps his own. He may see the likeness and try to eliminate it. In sophisticated ages, when work of this class is common, if the critic says, "This character owes something to Mosca; this scene reminds me of one in Webster," the wise author is able to say: "But it is not the same; here is a trait which Mosca never had; this scene has a turn far different from that one which you have in mind"; and the critic, forced to acknowledge this, stands silent but unconvinced. Since this is true, since the author so carefully avoids anything which suggests copying, imitation

of this indirect nature is much harder to identify decisively, to put one's finger upon, than that of a more direct kind. It is often disclosed more in the general atmosphere of the work than in any particular feature. It is seen, as has been said, in the author's tendency to follow a fashion, to constantly appeal to popular prejudice or opinion. It is noticeable at times in the *constant* use of character types, plot forms, situations, consecrated by service and to which the people are accustomed. It is suggested by a protean as well as by an unchanging style. It is in every literary age in greater or less degree, but is only to be pointed out as a sign of decadence when it is more powerful and important than what creative work there may be. Then it shows that the time for the change, or the destruction of the form of art of which it has taken possession, is not far distant.

The reason for that exaltation of and dependence on technique, which is commonly seen in periods of literary decadence, is much the same as those which explain the tendency toward indirect imitation. The great themes and ideas especially expressive of the period have been often used. George Polti has shown that there are but thirty-six dramatic situations;³ apparently not nearly all of these are available. Any really new situation, then, is hardly to be thought of. It is frequently true that the great poets of a creative period, perhaps depending on the power of their message, or, like Shakespeare, seemingly unconscious of the work they are doing, are very careless as to the niceties of structure and technique. They are sometimes dealing with a form that is new, or unknown to that period, whose laws and practice are not formulated. This shows itself frequently in ragged ends, in minor mistakes, occasionally in great ones. But as soon as the literary form becomes fairly fixed and its boundaries are settled with reasonable definiteness, a careful study of it begins. This may be philosophical, but is likely at first to be mainly empirical. The careful observer

³ "Les Trente-six Situations Dramatiques," George Polti.

notes that certain modes of treatment, particular ways of using scene or situation, are acceptable while others are not. He adopts those which succeed, and substitutes for the devices which do not satisfy one thing after another, until he finds something which is satisfactory. The new method of treatment at once becomes part of the technique of the play or the novel. He sees, too, that a very little thing, a few lines out of character, an awkward situation, may be enough to condemn a play, especially if it is not at bottom a really original one, a great work of art; and so he is driven in self-defense to take every possible precaution, to scan every line and scene with the utmost care, to watch anxiously the work of others who are succeeding. When the author sees that the boundaries are carefully fixed, he has more time to cultivate the plot of ground which is his, he has more time to give to details.

It is clear that a knowledge of and a skill in technique can be acquired by many mediocre and non-creative minds. It has even a deep fascination for many minds not only of this kind but of a much higher order. Many a man has the same joy in giving a perfect finish to his work that the lapidary has in seeing the diamond appear in beauty under his hand. It is, too, a thing which can be learned, which like the lapidary's trade can be gained by many men if they will but give to it sufficient time and effort. The fact that many whose greatest endowment is this technical skill gain a reasonable degree of popular approval encourages numbers to try to do the same. Thus the public is offered many works whose construction and form are of high grade. Trained by its servants, the public in turn comes to demand great perfection of form; and at length, among races especially inclined to develop and admire formal beauty, as the ancient Greeks and the French, we see societies which see and admire the most subtle points of technique, and condemn any carelessness in this particular.

In the qualities which are largely the result of an assured technique, smoothness and ease of development, the unity which

results from an action without episodes and unnecessary scenes and from a skillful joining of scene to scene, clearness of apprehension in the mind of the observer, the result of careful and discreet preparation on the part of the author,—in all these qualities many of the immediate successors of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Jonson easily equalled them. It is noteworthy that in a recent volume which discusses dramatic technique in great detail, only one work previous to the nineteenth century was taken to illustrate perfection of technique, and that was Massinger's, "A New Way to Pay Old Debts." The example was a happy one; but Brome and Shirley have some plays which, light and mechanical though they are, seem nearly irreproachable in this particular. The forgetfulness which has been their fate emphasizes the danger of paying attention too exclusively to this side of the playwright's business. Many of the modern French makers of plays show how easy it is to attain a tremendous temporary popularity with plays almost without value but which have the brilliancy which so often accompanies flawless form. This popular applause has at least two unfortunate results: it attracts many imitators, and tends to cast discredit on some plays of greater value.

There is no intention, of course, to depreciate the form side of literature. The greatest ideas and emotions ill-expressed, awkwardly or darkly presented, can hardly be called literature. It seems plain, on the other hand, that an excessive devotion to matters of technique shows a literature not of the highest quality, since from it harmony has departed. Its obvious necessity and the apparently easy victories it often obtains, not only lead to an overestimate of its importance but help to bring about many unsatisfactory conditions.

These conditions have been implied in which has been said; but it may be well to be more specific. One of these is the rule of recipes rather than of principles. The distinction is an important one, but not easy to express exactly. It is seen in the work of such men as Jonson or Corneille on the one side, and

their followers, or some of them, on the other. Jónson, whatever his successes or failures, knew well the broad principles on which the great drama is based, though he did not see all of them, those in particular which govern the romantic drama; but many of his followers who knew well how to write a play had no conception, so far as can be seen, as to why they wrote it as they did. They knew that the formula they applied brought success, at least for a time and of a kind. What they did not know was how the formula was derived. This some of them did not seem to care to know.

It appears to happen often that the man of great creative power does not know in any definite or precise way the laws which govern the work which he produces. He may know or feel in some mysterious way that certain things cannot be done,—sees an error when it is made. If he is a genius, this instinct must be his. On the other hand, he may know well the principles which govern his work,—he may follow them quite consciously. Either type of man may be able to put into the form of formulae the principles which govern his work. When we have men who have the formulae only in mind, then there is danger. Plainly, new fields cannot be conquered by such men; if new conditions arise which in part invalidate the rules with which they have worked or to which those rules do not readily apply, then they are helpless. They cannot build up a new technique, because they do not know the principles of which their old rules were merely a specialized expression. Cases of this kind are common,—men who fall by the way and get out of tune with the times because their one real possession is an ability to use dexterously a certain set of rules which cannot be readily fitted to new conditions.

The natural tendency of such men is, of course, to oppose, so far as lies in their power, the growth of such, for them, untoward conditions. This helps to produce uniformity of production, to continue long the reign of fixed types. The more conservative part of the public, always worried by anything

really original, helps to maintain this narrow circle of forms after it has once been established. The methods and formulae being clear and not very difficult to grasp, their success being sure, the young man will, unless by nature a pronounced radical, accept and use them. If he does not he runs the risk of being crushed by the combined strength of critic and public: "Every warbler has his tune by heart." An age such as that which followed the death of Pope, with its narrow round of permissible subjects and the large fields left uncultivated because considered unfitted for literary treatment, exemplifies this state of affairs. It was seen in the drama produced from 1620 to 1650. The chronicle-history play had gradually become a thing of the past, with only an occasional exception, such as "Perkin Warbeck." The romantic comedy, or rather what passed under that name, was still produced, but it had lost the gay *insouciance* which once marked it. Its happy maids and youths no longer "fleeted the time carelessly" under the greewood tree. That class of play, to which the name tragi-comedy has been given, was "lord of the ascendant," with the more realistic type of the comedy of "humors" as its main rival.

The more time and attention is given to the more technical and mechanical side of the drama, the less, obviously, can be given to the content of the play. So great and so exacting are the demands of drama that only genius of the supremest quality seems able to unite the two harmoniously; for the smaller men it is merely a question as to which side shall be the less neglected. The English temper, never strongly bent toward the formal side of art, has never produced anything at once so dexterous and so empty as some modern French plays; plays whose legerdemain charms for a moment by its weird perfection. The English weakness has been the opposite one, —a wealth of content whose real worth was obscured because not skilfully and effectually embodied. This was never more apparent than in the days of Shakespeare. But a change gradually took place. The successors of the earlier leaders, with far fewer ideas and really dramatic themes, with much

less material, wrote many more plays. But two results could be possible: either the plays must be much thinner, or the same material must be used over and over again. Both results are plainly discernible.

As has been suggested, a vast but subtle imitation and adaptation took place. Professor Schelling has pointed out in speaking of Wilson, the writer of comedies, that his scenes can be traced with the greatest ease to many other men; but adds that this was in all probability merely the use of material already worn threadbare by repeated use,—something which was considered public property. As a consequence the individual play, if taken alone and read by one not familiar with the work of the period, may seem far from empty; but if he reads a number, by one author or by several, he soon sees that the sum total is but small. The matter was not helped by the efforts of such men as Ford to invent new dramatic material, for many of the things they added were negative rather than positive,—tended to destroy or obscure truth rather than to increase or illuminate it. Conversation for its own sake, scenes of deep emotion which confuse rather than clarify the soul, activities which come to an end rather than to a conclusion, are painfully common.

The authors of the period seem to have unconsciously acted according to the doctrine that anything can be treated by the artist if only the treatment be good; that truth can be readily disregarded,—is of little importance. As they had probably not thought out the matter, they did not see, apparently, that, even accepting this doctrine as sound, it may be added as a proposition of equal validity that no amount of artistry can make certain themes worth the pains spent upon them. This was the prime mistake of several men of talent, industry, or poetic power. No amount of skill can make such matters as are treated in "Holland's Leaguer" or "The Unnatural Combat" really worth while.

This lack of content is of course not wholly due to the absorption of the authors of the time in technique; it is prob-

ably due in large part to the fact that the stirring questions of the hour were practically forbidden them. The time was one of intense political and religious warfare. Steadily day by day, year by year, Puritan and Churchman, kingsman and parliamentarian, were becoming more clearly marked, more widely separated. The nation was no longer harmonious. The dramatic and absorbing events of the hour, one would think, could have served as themes for a vital and compelling drama. They did not. The reasons why they did not were probably two: A drama could hardly be written on such themes without being in a sense partisan, and this would mean that a vast body of the citizens would be insulted and outraged. The ridicule of the Puritans, which adds so much to the humor of "Bartholomew Fair," under Charles the First, prevented its frequent appearance.⁶ The wise dramatists would not be likely to use a subject which would arouse intense opposition, and practically all subjects of great interest at the time were of this nature.

There was a more specific reason why such subjects were taboo. When Middleton's "Game of Chess" had in 1624 brought the king of Spain upon the stage in an unfavorable light, the government, though at that time not on the best of terms with Spain, had at once forced the discontinuance of the play. Plays which referred to domestic politics were edited or suppressed; quite capriciously, it is true, but often enough to make the author who wished to avoid the jail and be paid for his labor very wary in political reference.⁷ Brome, with his usual anxiety to stand well with his public, says:

"His familiar mirth's as good
As if h'had writ strong lines, and had the fate,
Of other fools for meddling with the State."⁸

⁶ "Under Charles the First it ("Bartholomew Fair") was . . . but rarely seen on the stage . . ." Ward, Vol. 2, p. 370.

⁷ The imprisonment of Jonson, Marston, and Chapman because of the comedy "Eastward Hoe" is a case in point. Ward, Vol. 2, p. 311.

⁸ Prologue to "The Damselle."

In another place he promises

"To utter nothing may be understood
Offensive to the state, manners or time" . . ."

When references to foreign or to domestic politics were intended they were surprisingly allusive. Perhaps this is the reason we see so few; the spectators, more familiar with the personal and intimate side of the politics of the period than we, may have seen many more.

The man whose strength lies in technique will naturally be unwilling to handle great themes, for if he succeeds in giving them anything like adequate treatment the theme will at once attract attention, and thus divert it from the form which the author prides himself upon. If, as is most likely to be the case, the treatment is comparately inadequate, it is sure to make the failure of the technique to measure up to the idea painfully conspicuous; for few things are more annoying than to see a mighty passion apparently produced and accompanied by the tricks and turns, the stage-wizardry, which seem at least inoffensive when used to advance a "show," our interest in which ends with the fall of the curtain. What has been said implies that mediocrity is fostered by over-devotion to the form side. If a play does not have much substance, but that little is skilfully presented, it will certainly not belong to the lowest order of plays. Great interest in the mechanics of the play, a strong tendency to make every subject conform to a fairly rigid set of rules, is not only quite certain to cramp and distort a very powerful theme, but will usually discourage the author from choosing a subject whose molten strength may burst his mould. The formula once fairly complete and satisfactory, it can be applied with the certainty of reasonable success by any craftsman who knows his business. The difference between "Titus Andronicus" or "Pericles" and "King Lear," between "The Alchemist" and "The New Inn," between

⁹ Prologue to "The English Moor."

the worst and the best work of Marlowe, is a tremendous one. The work of many of their successors, whose plays, too, are not entirely contemptible, is notable for its singular uniformity.

Immorality, though often seen in a literary period not distinctly decadent, seems almost always an accompaniment of such a period. Schiller has indicated the reason for this.¹⁰ He says that as the great "sentimental" or romantic poets are likely at times to be guilty of ecstasies, wild imaginings, so naïve poets, those who picture life as they see it, are likely to be at times flat, coarse, immoral. In each case their admirers or imitators will often push these casual traits into very exaggerated forms. What in the master was a small part of the picture will be expanded into a complete one, or will be made vastly more pronounced. The excuse will be given that this is found in the great artists. The guilty one will be apparently unaware that what a poet can do a man who is not a poet may be debarred from doing. It is plain that the more realistic writer who aims to portray life in any large and true way can hardly avoid showing us at times scenes which are in themselves coarse or immoral. These things are a part of life, and any description of life which claimed to be at all complete would have to show them, otherwise it would be no true description, for it would lack an important element. The great artist, sane and far-seeing, will give such material its place, but will see, else he is no true artist, that it is not the great feature of life. The smaller man, or the man less normal, with clouded vision, is very likely to take for his theme an incident immoral in itself, or to make the whole atmosphere of his work such as is only found in the stews. He is misleading and untrue, because he makes that which is subordinate, predominant.

Had Schiller written with the age of Shakespeare in mind,

¹⁰ Schiller's "Samtlich Werke," Vol. 15, "Ueber naive und sentimentalische Dichtung."

he could not have changed his statements in any way. In the great poets of this time coarseness is common; a scene immoral or suggestive of licentiousness is occasionally to be met with; but in no case, I think, is flagrant immorality the poet's theme. With their successors there is a change,—adultery or incest form the basis of many plays. In such a play as " 'Tis Pity . . ." the author clearly sympathizes with the guilty brother and sister, subtly suggests all possible palliation and excuse, claims our pity rather than our condemnation, and this in spite of the fact that he has shown no ground on which pity could legitimately be based.

There is a difference between coarseness and immorality. The former is more than the latter a matter of the customs of the time; it is, too, frequently a matter of speech; what is the language of all classes and of common usage at one age, is considered indelicate and is heard only among the vulgar a few years later. Scenes and matters which are referred to or shown without shame become taboo. Comedy, because of its more realistic character, is much more likely to be coarse than tragedy or tragi-comedy. This is seen in the comic parts of Shakespeare and Jonson. Coarseness and immorality have a close connection, but they do not invariably accompany each other. Shakespeare has much coarseness, while some of the plays of his successors whose themes are repulsively indecent have hardly a word to which objection could be taken. In realistic comedy the two are commonly united.

In the matter of immorality in the drama there are of course degrees. It may be, as has been suggested, a merely casual and incidental thing, something which is not vital to the story, though necessary in an indirect way. We may regret that it is necessary, but we regret it only because we lament the existence of such things; we do not condemn the poet for using them, so long as he uses them in this manner.

When, however, the play by reason of its plot, its characters, its atmosphere, perchance its very location, gives us

over to the frankly or covertly immoral, we feel at once that the author who produced it is not entirely normal; if we find that such work is common with him, is characteristic of the age, we say that both show one sign at least of decay; though our condemnation may be much modified by brilliancy of dialogue, poetic power, or skilful technical treatment. If we are told that a drama of this nature reflects truthfully some section of society, as may be said of the Restoration drama, the answer is clear. If it represents but one class of society, it can hardly claim to be a truthful picture of the time, cannot lay claim to the high virtue of being national.

Where such a drama is found we can never be free from the suspicion that the author wrote as he did, in part at least, to attract the applause and favor of those who at all times are strongly drawn by anything licentious. This does not necessarily imply that the author is any better or has any higher ideals than those to whom he is catering,—the supposition should always be that he is not. If he is a man of low character, writes in such a way as merely to reflect his own evil traits, and is received with applause and allowed to stand as representative of his time, we are justified in concluding that the age is of such a nature that nothing of the highest character could come from it. No literature shows, I think, any period of darkness unrelieved; the years from 1606 or a little before that date, to 1642 do show a great change in this particular. There are few plays more loathsome or sewer-like than "The Revenger's Tragedy," printed in 1607; but the tendency to apologize for and excuse lust and crime appears to increase,—certainly it became much more usual to depict scenes of the grosser kind.

We do not feel that the lowest note is ever struck among the authors of this time; that is to say, we do not feel that the writer has deliberately sought to win applause by the use of indecencies which he himself condemns, which are foreign to his nature. We do feel something quite as depressing.

that it was only in such scenes that some of the authors of this period felt really at home.

We know that many poets not long dead,—Greene, Peele, Marlowe,—led lives as irregular as those of their successors twenty years later could possibly have been, yet few signs of this are to be noted in the dramas they have left us. A higher and truer sense of their duty as artists, or the nature of their public, saved them. While the tendency toward immorality is discernible apparently in all decadent literature, there is an obvious reason why it should be apparent at this time. That reason is the general absence of the Puritans from the theater. However narrow they may have been, however blind they were to artistic beauty, they possessed the qualities which could have kept the drama from excesses such as it showed. Their absence meant that the theater was left in the hands of the lower classes, to whom coarseness is always palatable and licentiousness rarely displeasing; and of the aristocracy, to whom, in that day at least, the indecent was not objectionable. The attitude of the Puritans was, however, only one cause of the moral decay of the stage, and it was partly negative,—it merely allowed certain strong tendencies the opportunity to show themselves clearly. As has been said, the increasing devotion to technique led to a disregard of the subject treated. At the same time the desire for new themes to attract the jaded playgoers encouraged incursions into fields hitherto untrod. This was a main reason for the use of immoral plots, persons and scenes. That love of the beautiful which is so intense as to lead to a disregard of the ethical, that delicate sensitiveness which amounts to a disease and which is met with in civilizations of great age and in races tending to decay, are not met with in the drama of this period, do not serve to explain the moral laxness of this stage.

No rank of society is wholly free from the implied accusation of immorality. The tragedies with their scenes of secret

intrigue, murder and destroying lust were usually located in Italy, whose dark and secret horrors, poisonings, sudden deaths, seem to have attracted the imaginations of the poets; but an audience eagerly discussing the shameless divorce and marriage of Lady Essex, the poisoning of Sir Thomas Overbury, and other scandals little less open, could hardly have failed to make a local application. The middle and lower classes were of course represented in the comedies, and the picture, though less horrifying, is no less disgusting.

The tendency toward eclecticism which marks some decadent periods was not particularly characteristic of this, though present in some degree in the two forms which it may assume. Strictly speaking only one of these forms can be said to be a mark of decadence. As has been pointed out above, forms of literature long established tend to become fixed and hardened,—it becomes very difficult to use them except in the way settled by criticism and custom. This Egyptian art is certain to become wearisome, and men desirous of giving variety to their work will try to combine features of different classes. The result is, in most cases, that they merely succeed in grafting certain twigs or branches on a trunk which is unchanged. There is no blending of forms, but a forcible and artificial transference of certain features of one to another. The result is increased confusion,—less inner harmony than before. This failure may be caused by intractable material; it is often brought about by a lack of the creative power in the author. He is not able to melt the different masses in the glow of his imagination so that they will mix and mingle, and result in something different in its characteristics from either of the original substances.

When this real union is brought about the product may still be eclectic, we may still be able to see or feel, though not in a very exact way, the kinds of material which went to form it, but it is an eclecticism wholly different from the artificial kind first described. The fusing of forms thus brought about

often leads, in time, when clarified and given time to show its real nature, to some new type of literature, or some new development of an old type, which is the crowning feature of a new age. With the mechanical union nothing of this sort happens. It leads to nothing unless it be an imitation of itself. It is, when common, one mark of a period of decay. The second type distinguishes a transition period. In such a period, when it is past, one can see plainly the promise of "the days that are to be"; in a decadent period it is hard to see such promise; an entire decay of the old forms or their destruction or suspension by war, invasion, or some event, such as the closing of the theaters in 1642, must come to give the *coup de grace* to the out-worn models so that the imagination can start on another creative career comparatively unhampered.

In this particular case such a destructive stroke was given, so we can never say with absolute certainty that had it not come the age would have gone from its bad estate to a yet worse one; we cannot affirm that it would not have proven transitional. A new drama or some other strong literary genus *might* have appeared. We can say that the age showed the marks of decay which we have enumerated, that it grew plainly worse as the years went by, that the signs of transition to a new and better state were very few and sadly far between. Eclecticism, of either kind mentioned, was not particularly common during this time, though by no means absent.

Strain, subtle imitation, immorality, and over-devotion to technical detail were the conspicuous features. Strain was naturally most common in tragedy, devotion to technique and imitation in comedy, immorality was as frequent and well-nigh as gross in the former as in the latter.

Richard Brome represents more completely than any other man, I think, the qualities and tendencies of the drama during the period under discussion. He wrote about twenty

plays, fifteen of which we have; enough to give us a broad view of the two types of play most popular at the time, romantic tragi-comedy and the realistic comedy based on the comedy of "humours." His plays are the kind the people liked. The statements prefixed to the plays when they were afterward published, the commendatory verses which precede many of the plays and are from the hands of distinguished men, the rapidity with which play followed play, the testimonials of other men brought out casually in relation to other matters, all prove Brome to have been a popular playwright.

Many circumstances combined to make it antecedently probable that Brome would be one of the representative figures of his age if he wrote at all. When he was born we do not know, but he was a "servant" to Ben Jonson in 1614. He was alive in 1652¹¹ and dead in 1653.¹² In the prologue to "The Court Beggar," acted in 1632, he speaks of himself as being "full of age and care"; but Shakespeare when still in the thirties speaks of himself as being old; it seems to have been one of the literary conventions of the times, and not to be taken very seriously. It is very probable, though not certain, that he reached manhood about the time when the stage was at its highest point. He lived through the whole period of its decline.

As a playwright, he was a man of talent, not of genius. No man without talent in this line could have written plays so well constructed, so strong technically as his; no dramatist of genius would have presented plays so lacking in poetry¹³

¹¹ In 1652 he published his last play, "The Jovial Crew," with a dedication from his own hand.

¹² In 1653 Alexander Brome published five plays of Richard Brome, with an introduction "To the Readers" in which he says the author is dead.

¹³ Saintsbury, in his "History of English Prosody" (Vol. 2, p. 309) says: "When he (Brome) has occasion to give verse, which he does not infrequently, it is quite competent, and in fact rather interesting, because it takes all the liberties, redundance, trisyllabic feet, etc. It

both in conception and in style. The plays impress one as being of the kind that could easily win favor for a time, but by reason of lack of both content and brilliancy of humor could hardly deserve lasting fame.

Brome was, so far as we can see, a man of small education. His position as servant would lead us to expect this, and his works seem to confirm it. He seems to have known some Latin, for it is made use of occasionally in various ways. He does not appear to have been really conversant with classic literature, for the constant allusion to classic mythology and ancient history which is so common a feature in the work of almost all his contemporaries is not seen in his plays, although such allusions are not entirely absent. In his realistic plays, this is not surprising, but it is remarkable that it should be so little noticeable in the more romantic comedies. He may have known some German, probably some French, in a day when everyone knew French; apparently no Italian. He never impresses one as being at all scholarly. The one thing he probably knew well was the dramatic literature of the period. Lack of education was certainly no bar to greatness in the drama, but when combined with abilities far from the highest it would naturally lead, then as now, to a devotion too great and slavish to the fashions of the hour, to a nar-

is never, perhaps, very poetical, but also it never falls into mere chaos. The general blank-verse scheme is perfectly well maintained." ("History of English Prosody," Macmillan & Co., London, 1908.) On the other hand Schelling, after speaking of the relations of Brome and Dekker, says: ". . . no scruple of Dekker's subtler gift, that of poetry, is discoverable in the verses of Brome." ("Elizabethan Drama," Vol. 2, p. 269.) Ward says: "Most certainly he was not a poet" (Ward: Article in the Dictionary of National Biography.) With the latter I agree. A careful reading of all the plays fails to show any lines that strike one as especially beautiful, though some are pretty. It shows that he often changed from prose to verse without any reason so far as the character of the subject matter was concerned, though he did of course see that realistic or comic demanded prose and great passion verse. So pedestrian is much of his verse that one has to pay rather careful attention to be sure that it is not really prose.

rowing devotion to a few classes of plays. I know of no author of the period who wrote as many plays as he and attempted as few varieties.

He was, too, a poor man. His position as Jonson's "man" proves this. He gives testimony to the same effect when he says frankly that he is writing for money,¹⁴ and when he becomes angry because some other playwright had given money, probably indirectly by furnishing gorgeous costumes and scenery, to have his play produced. An action likely to injure the income of poorer authors.

Brome marks himself as representative of the time when he follows Ben Jonson. Not that all the playwrights of the period were numbered among the "sons of Ben," though probably a majority of the more distinguished were; but Jonson gave to the period a great part of its most important tendencies, he started it on the course. Shakespeare was, it is true, a far more powerful force in tragedy than was Jonson, but tragedy was written less and less, while comedy, either "humorous" or tragi-comic, was more and more popular.

It may be said, moreover, that the prevalence of discipleship is a common mark of a decadent period. Just as weak

¹⁴ "He (the author) does not ayme, So much at praise, as pardon; nor does claime, Lawrell, but Money."

(Prologue to "The Damselle," Vol. 1.)

"Then find us money and we'll find you play."

(Prologue to "The English Moor," Vol. 2.)

"Yet you to him your favour may expresse
As well as unto those whose forwardnesse
Makes them your Creatures thought, who in a way
To purchase fame give money with their Play,
Yet you sometimes pay deare for't, since they write
Lesse for your pleasure than their own delight."

(Prologue to "The Court Beggar.")

"But to stand beg, beg for reputation for one that has no countenance to carry it, and must ha' money is such a Pastime! If it were for one of the great and curious Poets that give these plays as the Prologue said, and money too, to have 'em acted; . . ."

(Epilogue to "The Court Beggar.")

men like to lean on laws and customs, so weak men, or even men of power who live in an age shadowed by a mighty personality, are prone to follow a strong man, either from a sense of their own comparative impotence, because of personal admiration, to win a sense of security, or to gain popular favor. Jonson was a man peculiarly fitted to lead and to attract followers. He was an extremely vigorous and positive personality, he was brilliantly educated in the subjects then considered the only ones really worth while, the classics, and was able to explain and defend his artistic creed; he had, too, a very definite and clear-cut dramatic ideal, and, what must have been very attractive to his admirers, had suffered much for this ideal and rarely swerved from it. But his very virtues were an injury to the cause of the drama, for they were combined with a certain intolerance of spirit, a narrowness which sometimes led him to ridicule works as great or greater than his own but which did not fit into the framework he considered the only proper one. His ability as a satirist made it a dangerous matter to arouse his wrath, and the men who crossed swords with him must have been exceedingly sorry for it. By nature a fighter, he was often at war, and his intellectual powers and his determination gave him almost continually the victory. This served to make his style of drama popular, to lend the light of victory to his ideas.

Jonson's most characteristic feature was his use of "humorous" characters, those marked by some oddity, whim, or peculiarity so strong as to apparently rule and characterize its possessor. The idea of a characteristic quality predominant in every man was of course an old one, and had in it much truth. It lent itself easily to the service of comedy. But nothing in the drama needs more careful handling, more easily becomes mere distortion and grotesqueness. Even in much of Jonson's work one feels that he is meeting mere walking "humours," rather than men and women with real and complex personalities. The custom went so far at last

that a dramatist could boast that every one of his "humours" in a play was entirely new.

Brome followed his master in the use of humorous characters, and was less able to give them individuality, though he did at times succeed in making them thoroughly laughable. Such figures are Sarpego,¹⁵ the pedant, Crossewill,¹⁶ the contrary-minded gentleman, Hearty,¹⁷ whose "humour" is good nature, Testy,¹⁸ who is touchiness personified, and many others. In no case has he copied any particular figure. He followed Jonson in the type of comedy he produced, for the greater number of his works are realistic comedies of humour;¹⁹ and when he does essay the species of tragi-comedy, which was fundamentally romantic, he brought realism into it by the types of character used and the way in which they were presented. He was aware of the growing popularity of the tragi-comedy, and though he tried it he disapproved of it.²⁰ His display of out-of-the-way learning, such as the argot

¹⁵ "The City Wit."

¹⁶ "The Covent Garden Weeded."

¹⁷ "A Jovial Crew."

¹⁸ "The English Moor; or The Mock Marriage."

¹⁹ I am aware that Professor Schelling, to whose great work I am much indebted, prefers to call these comedies of manners. It seems to me that on the whole they have more in common with the comedy of humours, the Jonsonian school, than with the comedies of manners as exemplified by Etherege, Congreve and their contemporaries, whom we think of as especially representative of that type.

²⁰ In the Prologue to "The Antipodes," he says:

"Pardon our just Ambition, yet, that strive
To keep the weakest Branch o'th' Stage alive.
I meane the weakest in their great esteeme,
That count all slight, that's under us, or nigh:
And only those for worthy subjects deeme,
Fetch'd, or reached at (at least) from farre, or high:"

In the Prologue to "The Jovial Crew" he says:

"The Title of our Play, 'A Joviall Crew,'
May seem to promise Mirth: Which wer a new,
And forced thing, in these sad and tragick daies,

of the beggars in "The Jovial Crew," the military terms in "Convent Garden Weeded," and the list of dances in "The New Academy," was probably inspired by Jonson, whose "Bartholomew Fair" and "The Alchemist" are perfect mines of such material.

He does not "show himself" in the play as a criticising member of the cast; he specifically denies, except in one instance ("Convent Garden Weeded"), any desire to instruct; he does not express scorn of his audience, but rather an anxious desire to please it, though he does hope on one or two occasions that they will judge him according to "the antient Comick Lawes."²¹ In these points he goes contrary to Jonson's custom, but shows his anxiety to please his public, for Jonson had been bitterly condemned for doing them.

He was aware that he was no poet: "A little wit, lesse learning, no poetry,"²² he claims; he "scarce ever durst rank himself above the worst of Poets";²³ he calls himself a "Play-maker" rather than a poet, nevertheless "desires to know" in the epilogue to "The Damselle," "though he assume no Bayes, whether he pull'd faire for a leafe or no."

He has "come not hither to be an instructor to any ot

For you to finde, or we expresse in Playes.

. . . . For, now it chances,

Our Comick Writer finding that Romances

Of Lovers, through much travell and distresse,

Till it be thought, no Power can redresse

Th' afflicted wanderers, thought stout Chevalry

Lend all his aid for their delivery;

Till, lastly some impossibility

Concludes all strife, and makes a Comedie

Finding (he saies) such Stories bear the sway,

Near as he could, he has compos'd a Play,

Of Fortune-tellers, Damsels, and their Squires,

Expos'd to strange, Adventures, through the Briers

Of Love and Fate."

²¹ Epilogue to "The English Moor."

²² Prologue to "The Love-Sick Court."

²³ Prologue to "The Queen's Exchange."

you,"²⁴ it "were a presumption" "that he should take pains . . . to show what you already by your studies know."²⁵

His purpose was very clear and was very frankly put: he "aims only to gaine your laughter,"²⁶ he does not claim "Lawrell but Money," for his intent "is his owne welfare, and your merriment";²⁷ "now your laughter is all he aims to move."²⁸

It is certainly true that a man trying to do a small thing may accomplish a great one; but this is so unusual that we do not expect a man to reach any greater success than that at which he consciously aims. Nor do we, if his aims are low, expect that his achievements will be of high character. The things of which a man thinks, the objects he desires, subtly create a mental atmosphere which has a decisive effect on all that he produces, all he does. We cannot say that Brome's aims were low, but we are certain they were not high. No one can blame the author for desiring to make money, the dramatist for trying to give the public what it wishes, the comedy-writer for appealing to the fun-loving propensities of men. But for one to attempt to do nothing more is to bar oneself deliberately from the greatest success, perhaps from any great success. It is to encourage absorption, to renounce that freedom of mind and will which seems an essential to all creative work. The tendency toward such renunciation on the part of the author, the willingness on the part of the reader or hearer to accept such uninspired work, is one of the landmarks of a period given over to routine, no longer joying in the vision and the dream.

This satisfaction with a limited ideal, or at least the conscious confinement of his efforts to a narrow field with no at-

²⁴ Prologue to "The City Wit."

²⁵ Prologue to "The Northern Lass."

²⁶ Prologue to "The Novella."

²⁷ Prologue to "The Damoiselle."

²⁸ Prologue to "The Spargus Garden."

tempt to achieve glorious sublunary things, was no doubt for the best in Brome's case. We feel at all times that any effort to move in a more exalted field would have shown awkwardness and a lack of ready adaptability. When he does tentatively essay the tragic or semi-tragic in "The Queen and the Concubine" the result is melancholy enough.

What effect did this desire to amuse and to do nothing else have on the content of the plays? Naturally, one says, they will be full of humor, and they are, though the humor is sometimes arid and manufactured. Naturally, too, the author with this end in view is spared the "bitter craving to strike heavy blows" which possessed Jonson, and which gave his best plays a moral earnestness, a loftiness utterly foreign to the work of his disciple. His villains, one cannot help thinking, are punished or made ridiculous if they are punished at all, not because they are evil but because it was the custom to punish the villain of the drama or to turn the laugh against him. Not having the gift of poetry, not being endowed with a brilliant wit, he was unable to conceal the essential emptiness of his work, though his technical skill caused it to be ignored for a time. In this, also, he represents his age, with, of course, the exception of Massinger, for the drama became shallower and more frivolous as the national temper, stirred by the political and religious conflicts of the time, became deeper and more serious, until war began and the theaters were closed.

Given, then, a man with the views which Brome held, we would expect the kind of work which he produced. On the other hand, the possession of those beliefs must mark him as a man representative of his time, for, if we may judge by the work they have left us, these principles were the ones held by most of his contemporaries in the drama.

The tendency toward the strained, the wildly improbable, Brome almost entirely escaped. This is partly due to the fact that he never attempted tragedy, and that, with two excep-

tions, his more serious comedies were realistic in some essential features. It is true the plots of his most realistic plays can hardly be called probable or lifelike; but this is true not only of his work but of that of his contemporaries and his predecessors in the same class of plays.

In a very real sense the name "realistic comedy" implies a contradiction. It is never used in the same way, with the same literal meaning, that the term "realistic novel" is used. At least it is not so used when applied to the work of men who wrote before the nineteenth century. The word *comedy* implied that almost anything was possible, that the action took place in a world in which cause and effect, the inevitable logic of events, did not have complete control; where incongruities appeared which were the result of chance alone; where characters were brought into juxtaposition simply because the sight of them together would arouse our risibilities; where situations might at any time develop which were utterly improbable, perhaps impossible. In the realm of comedy any strict adherence to the facts of ordinary life was not to be demanded, was not expected; the word *realistic* referred primarily to the situation chosen for the play and the mode of character treatment. Realistic comedy was comedy whose scene was laid among the people who looked upon it, or those closely akin to them, in their own land, and whose characters were presented in such a way as to make them seem natural and life-like in such an environment.

But since each element of a work of art affects and modifies every other, imposes conditions upon it of various kinds, it is inevitable that the very fact that a play is located in the life we know well and that its characters are reproductions of those we daily meet, should impose limitations of some sort on the actions they may be made to do, the scenes in which they may be made to figure. On an unknown Bohemian shore, in a Calabrian land, among people unlike any we have known, all things are possible; we unconsciously accept

this when we see the picture first presented. We may be able to convince ourselves that heroism as great, love as self-sacrificing, friendship as self-forgetful, is to be found on Main street, in the homes of our friends Jones and Smith as was ever shown in any fairyland of romance; but centuries of tradition, as well as the ordinary daily life of these friends of ours with its commonplace routine of unromantic duties, makes it impossible for us to really *feel* that such love, heroism or friendship is possible. Thus certain kinds of plot and incident possible to romantic comedy are not readily accepted in realistic comedy; but this is not because of their inherent improbability or impossibility, for incidents just as wild, though different in kind, are accepted in realistic comedy. "The Tale of a Tub" and "The English Moor" are little less probable than "The Case is Altered" or "The Lovesick Court." It is true, on the other hand, that plot and incident *may* in the realistic comedy stick much closer to actual life than is possible in romantic comedy.

We are not, therefore, to think that Brome was departing from tradition when he placed in a setting so realistic as that of "The English Moor" or "The City Wit" a set of incidents so palpably improbable. He followed tradition, rather than disregarded it. The place where he shows the most decided tendency to follow the custom then too common among the writers of tragedy, is in "The Queen and the Concubine." The Queen of this play, driven from her home and friends by a faithless husband and his paramour, a monster of depravity,—tortured in many ways, shows a willingness, nay an enthusiastic desire, to accept all mistreatment, to be a suffering martyr; which is so utterly improbable as to provoke a smile, rather than a tear.

We have already intimated that Brome was not prone to imitation or borrowing of any very obvious or common kind. Mr. Ward says: "'A Winter's Tale' and 'Henry VIII,' perhaps also 'King Lear,' contributed hints for 'The Queen and

Concubine,' and 'King Lear' and 'Macbeth' for 'The Queen's Exchange.' 'The Two Noble Kinsmen' cannot have been out of Brome's mind when he wrote 'The Lovesick Court';—while 'The Beggar's Bush' of Fletcher is most likely to have suggested the notion of 'The Jovial Crew,' or 'The Merry Beggars.'"²⁹ It has been suggested that "The Antipodes" was suggested by Jonson's masque, "The World in the Moon." The amusing but scandalous device which the lovers in "The Spargus Garden" use to outwit their stern relations, is akin to one used in "The Heir" of Thos. May. The Projectors of "The Court Beggar" may owe something to Marmion's "Holland's Leaguer." Mr. Fleay, speaking of "The City Wit," says: "Dekker's influence is more clearly visible in it than in the other plays."³⁰ He refers of course to Dekker, the author of "The Shoemakers' Holiday," not to that side of Dekker which found expression in "Olde Fortunatus" and "The Witch of Edmonton." This side of Dekker does not seem to have affected Brome.

The thing to be noticed in all these suggestions is their tentative and dubitative character. The word 'hint' is the best one to use; one feels that the two ungrateful daughters and the one faithful daughter of Lear may have started Brome's mind on the trail which led at last to the faithful son and daughter and the treacherous son of Segebert³¹ but nothing like a close parallel between the two plots in the beginning, development, or conclusion can be affirmed. The more closely the situation and characters concerned are studied the vaguer the resemblance grows. The same thing is true in the case of "The Jovial Crew" and "The Beggar's Bush." Both represent people of comparatively high station masquerading as beggars, and that is about as far as the likeness goes. There

²⁹ A. W. Ward's article on Brome in the Dictionary of National Biography.

³⁰ "Chronicle of the English Stage." A. G. Fleay.

³¹ In "The Queen's Exchange."

is no likeness between the dispossessed duke and his daughter and friends who live a beggar's life for months or years to escape death, and the five jolly young people who assume the beggar's rags for a day or two as a lark, and wander down the lanes white with may, never in danger, meeting strange people and confronted by new and amusing situations, but always conscious that they can, in an hour's time, reassume their own station.

The same thing may be said in each case given; nothing more can be affirmed than that certain scenes or characters may have set the writer's mind working and given him an idea which he could adapt to a very different situation. His plots are "all his own," his characters also, so far as they are not the repetition of stock-types which everyone used, and which had grown up so gradually or been known so long that no one person could be called their author.

The fact that Brome uses these type characters with their mechanical traits is not so important as the fact that he used hardly any other characters. His repetition of scenes threadbare with use, added to the testimony afforded by his characters, convinces us that he had really no originality; that had he had no libraries of plays in which to steep himself, whose material he could assimilate and cunningly reshape, he could have given us nothing.

His most provoking habit is perhaps his repetition of himself. Shylock and Barabbas are both Jews, both usurers, both cruel, clever, active, at last punished, yet no one could for a moment confuse the two. They are men as individual as you and I. Vermine³² and Quicksands³³ are not only discouragingly like too many other usurers, as seen in the comedies of the time, but are so like each other in essentials that a person well acquainted with the plays in which they appear can be excused if he changes them from one play to the other. If

³² In "The Damoiselle."

³³ In "The English Moor."

this is true of the usurer, who offers the dramatist so fine an opportunity for individualization, we need not be surprised if it is also true of the lovers, the stern parents, the country gentlemen. Though the similarity may easily be overstated, it is a striking feature of the plays. One soon comes to feel that whatever difference there may be between the lovers of any two plays is more the result of some slight differences of environment than of any real difference between the characters in their essential features. In Frederick,³⁴ Fabritio,³⁵ and Samuel³⁶ there is little perceptible difference. In three plays we meet the rather unusual character, a faithful wife who is trying to cure her husband of jealousy.

In "The Novella" we see a virtuous young woman who, to frustrate a match which is being arranged for her lover, passes for a courtesan; in "The Damselle" a knight secretly puts up the honor of his daughter (as she is supposed to be) for sale in a lottery; in "The New Academy," an uncle sets up, with the aid of his niece and her friend, a dancing academy, which he privately announces to be a brothel. There is plainly a distinct similarity in the central idea of each and there is an opportunity for the same kind of scenes, suggestive, full of misunderstandings, carried on by the more or less coarse habitues of such establishments.

In fourteen of the fifteen plays, disguising plays a more or less prominent part. If any emergency arises some application of this device is likely to be used to solve the difficulty. Men appear as women, women as men, servants as doctors or people of prominence, one man as some other man, an Englishwoman as a foreign lady, etc. In short, this popular stage trick is used with wearisome frequency. The occasional blindness of his imitation is seen in the fact that the secret of this disguise is often kept from the audience, even when it forms

³⁴ In "The Court Beggar."

³⁵ In "The Novella."

³⁶ In "The Spargus Garden."

a most important part of the plot and should be made known to the audience. The reason for this mistake is perhaps to be found in the fact that Jonson made the same error in "The Silent Woman," where the secret of the sex of Epicoene is carefully kept from the audience; and that some other authors had been equally forgetful.

Secrets of birth, false marriages, a man marrying one person when he thinks he is marrying some one else, changed letters, confused identities, timely disappearances and reappearances, drunken scenes, last scene conversions,—all appear just as one expects them to. After having read a few of the plays one can, by reading over the *Dramatis Personae* of a new play with the accompanying remarks, make a shrewd guess as to the nature of many of the scenes, though the author's skill is sufficient to keep one interested in the development even of that which he has foretold.

The constant use of stock scenes and characters, the thinly veiled repetition of his own themes and his own people,—these all show how large a part absorptive imitation plays in his work.

The eclecticism which, as has been said, is often a characteristic feature of ages of literary decay, was not especially evident in the period here under discussion; nor was it very noticeable in the work of Brome. The timidity which led him to avoid all subjects likely to arouse opposition, kept him, as it did most of his contemporaries, in the beaten path. In one way, however, he did try to join two very different things, the masque and realistic comedy.

Shakespeare had used the masque in "The Tempest"; Fletcher presented one in his "Maid's Tragedy"; Webster had shown a "Masque of Madmen" in his "Dutchess of Malfi." These were all romantic plays, in which a masque did not seem particularly out of place. Jonson, though he presented three in "Cynthia's Revels," reprobated the desire of the public to see masques, and to have music and dancing in their plays.

In the court of James the First masques became very popular, splendid dresses, the scenery, music, dancing, and poetry combined appealed to the aesthetic feelings of the learned and those fond of great spectacles. Their cost confined them to the aristocracy and the court. Brome tried to give something of the sort to the people and at the same time to present his own favorite realistic comedy. He does adapt the masque, tries to give it a character in harmony with its new surroundings. The singing, dancing, and strange dresses are there, but their spirit is sometimes one of broad comedy, almost a farce. Usually they are lugged by the ears into the situation, which is merely confused by their presence. In some cases they are used as a definite part of the plot and serve a purpose. In all cases we feel that some other means could have been used to accomplish the end, and that they are brought in merely for the purpose of display. Somewhat the same thing may be said of the songs and dances interspersed through the plays, though there was a greater excuse for them in the usage of the older dramatists.

This effort is interesting as showing Brome's great desire for popular favor. It shows, we may suppose, that he was conscious of the monotony and barrenness into which the popular classes of drama were rapidly falling, and wished to give variety and life to the old forms. Because he lacked a delicate artistic sense the result cannot, on the whole, be called happy. It was a fashion not followed by his successors.

As not infrequently happens, Brome's narrowness, his inability to do certain things, contributed indirectly to his success in other things. Jonson's desire to instruct, or to hit an enemy, loaded some of his plays with scenes and passages which obstructed the action and distracted the attention. Such passages were doubtless much reduced or entirely eliminated by the actors; but when, as in "The Poetaster," the fundamental idea of the play is controversial, no pruning can save it. In some of the Restoration dramas we are likely to forget that action is the essential of the drama while we li-

ten to the cleverness of the dialogue. Neither of these things turned Brome aside from his great business of developing the action carefully, logically, to the chosen end; and neither of them, legitimately used, helped to give charm and content to his work.

Few playwrights have known their business, so far as it can be learned, better than he. None, probably, have been more industrious, more faithful to their task. The finish of technical matters, the careful organization, the great uniformity of his plays, are in striking contrast to the work of a few of his contemporaries and almost all his immediate predecessors. His technique does not fail him in any part of the play; nevertheless his last scene is often a failure because he does not sufficiently respect the personality of his own characters.

As critical a point as any in a play is the first scene, the introduction. Much must be done; we must be interested in the people on the stage and what they are doing; we must know with little delay who they are, where they are, what they are doing, why they are doing it; we must be given an idea of the situation and what is likely to develop; we must be prepared for what is to come—and we must not be aware that we are being told these things. Here Brome is entirely satisfying; all things are made clear, but not too clear. Usually the most important person in the play is on the stage when the curtain rises and is in action or in animated conversation. We are introduced at once to bustling life,—the tone is struck which is to sound throughout. The merely introductory part is not made too long; this is avoided by reserving some of the “conditions precedent,” if these are very numerous, and bringing them forth when needed.

By “conditions precedent” is meant the whole body of facts in regard to events preceding the opening of the play, and all the circumstances which it is necessary for us to know before we can understand the play itself. These may be numerous or few; they may be, and usually are, mainly given to us shortly after the play opens; they may be sifted through the play,

so that we can hardly notice that they have been told. The latter method is perhaps the most artistic, but it is also the most difficult and is sometimes quite impossible by reason of the plot. The first method has the disadvantage that the listener is called upon to remember a large number of disconnected facts. The giving of them must be done skilfully else it will seem bald and prosy.

Brome avoids the second peril by using rapid and evenly balanced dialogue for this purpose. This gives him a chance to repeat and emphasize the essential facts. He does not open with a soliloquy, nor does he place the burden of explanation on one person.

He chooses his incidents and scenes with a view to plot advancement and, ordinarily, to that alone. In the "Queen's Exchange" some incidents are given merely because of their comic value; but this play is serious in theme, and he treats it as a romantic comedy. In "Spargus Garden" he tries to show the character and habits of the place and its frequenters, a theme similar to that in "Bartholomew Fair," and this brings in many scenes not essential to the plot. Nothing is shown merely to exhibit or explain characters. Everything must further the plot or give an opportunity for the comic. In this, as in some other points, his technique is that of the comedy, of intrigue rather than that of the strictly "humorous" comedy.

Brome's great care in the construction of his scenes, in the treatment of incident, is due in part, I think, to his idea of humor. Though he used "humorous" and even comic characters, they are at their best not very funny,—his real humor is that of situation.

Not only are his scenes well constructed but they are bound together in the most skilful manner. This *liason de scene* is especially noteworthy because it was not then so much demanded as at present. Today the expense and complexity of the scenery makes it imperative that changes shall be reduced to the minimum. Still even in modern days we have

as many as four scenes following each other directly in which there is an entire change of character in each scene.³⁷ Such a thing is not seen in Brome's plays, though in some he approaches much nearer the loose and disconnected manner of many of his predecessors, including Shakespeare, than in others. In "The Jovial Crew," acts one, two and five show the stage continually occupied, characters enter and leave,—there is not a moment when the action is not being carried on. In Act I there are three entrances and four exits, in Act 2 there are eight entrances and four exits, in Act 5 there are seventeen entrances and ten exits; but these overlapping entrances and exits unite the whole into one panoramic picture. This not only makes for unity of plot and is an economy of the auditor's memory and attention, since he does not have to keep in mind so many apparently disconnected people and actions, but it gives an air of reality to the play which is quite impossible without it.

What has just been said implies that there are few character groups in these plays,—that each one deals with a group of people closely connected, whose activities act and react intimately and continually; that we do not have very different sets of people whose actions are brought to a focus only at or near the close of the play. Of course there are groups which work against each other, whose aims are opposite, but they are either quite closely connected from the first or are made to seem so by being silently absorbed into the action. The "Spargus Garden," by reason of the author's double aim, is an exception to this rule. Even where there seems to be quite a separation between the groups there are so many figures in common that we hardly notice any separation.

"M. Legouvé calls the playgoer both exacting and inconsistent, in that he insists that everything which passes before him on the stage shall be at once foretold and unforeseen."³⁸

³⁷ "The Beggar of Bethnal Green," by James Sheridan Knowles, 1834.

³⁸ "Studies of the Stage," p. 23. Brander Matthews.

Thus Mr. Matthews suggests the most inevitable feature of a play, and the one which demands the most constant attention on the part of the playwright,—for the hints must be given unobtrusively, the listener must think that his own unaided intelligence is solving the puzzle. They must be given at the right time; if they are given too soon they will be forgotten before they are needed, if too late the connection will be too obvious.

This preparation cannot be limited to things said and to a skilful use of dramatic irony,—it must include the development of character and the choice of incident. It is true that the rigorous demands of cause and effect can be more easily disregarded in comedy than in tragedy; the laugh which greets the humorous situation may serve to blind us to its essential improbability. We voluntarily put ourselves in a more tolerant mood, a less strict and analytic frame of mind, when we attend a comedy than when we go to see a tragedy. Nevertheless the more carefully the author motivates every act, makes it seem inevitable and true, the more satisfactory we find it, always granting that the fundamental idea may be improbable. If the events of the comedy are palpably unmotivated the play is likely to become a farce.

Such a play as "The English Moor" shows how carefully Brome attended to the "preparation," for its complex structure and the improbability of the idea on which it is based make demands of the strongest kind. If we are not to be confused and skeptical from the first, much care and effort must be unobtrusively exercised by the author in order that we may accept each event, may feel that it is in place and keeping. Only once does he fail, and this failure illustrates his weakness, his willingness to sacrifice the consistency of a character to the exigencies of the plot.

His preparation for the last act or the close of it is sometimes inadequate. Here he is met by many difficulties, some of which are inherent, others of his own invention or the

result of dramatic tradition and custom. According to long accepted tradition the conclusion of the comedy must be happy,—even the villain must be punished very lightly, if at all; the troublemakers and fools must not cloud the general joy. So Brome, like many of his betters, is prone to convert his villain by main strength in the last scene. For this no preparation is likely to be adequate.

There was also a tradition that everyone must be on the stage when the curtain fell. This demanded great ingenuity and the use of many expedients in order to bring the cast together in anything like a lifelike manner. This custom Brome follows and gives us a full stage when the curtain falls, whatever effort it may cost. Usually every character, great or small, is brought in; though sometimes a servant or minor character is left out. This is often done very cleverly; but at times the devices used are far too obvious.

As has been said before, Brome is fond of masques. He is able to use them effectively, to make them an integral part of the play, to serve as a part of the plot. The two masques shown in "The English Moor," for instance, are vital parts of the play. The excision of either would leave a gap. This is not always the case; at least half of the masques given could be cut from the plays with no serious injury.

Brome is especially fond of using a masque at the close. Its advantages, from a scenic or popular viewpoint, are clear. The bright dresses, music, dances, and the crowd on the stage made a brilliant operatic close. To gain this Brome was willing to sacrifice much. Their extraneous character is usually painfully clear, and the preparation for them is unpleasantly palpable. This is true in the case of the masques which close "The Love-Sick Court" and "The Court Beggar." In the more romantic plays the masque seems less out of place than in the more realistic matter-of-fact ones. In the latter it gives to the comedy an air of cheap vaudeville. This was probably less the case in a day when disguisings,

mummings, and morris-dances were common at every great feast day among both high and low.

Mr. Price tells us that "It is well to emphasize the fact that what is often called technical skill is simply imitativeness and barrenness of the most detestable kind." This is certainly true in part of Brome's technical triumphs. His repetition of his own mistakes helps to show this; the unvarying character of his technique shows it still more. Still, imitative though his technique is, it does win victories of a kind, and is rarely so obvious as to repel the ordinary theatergoer or the casual reader. Its essential barrenness is seen when we consider his characters and characterization.

The vast majority of his characters fall readily into a few well-established categories. "Humorous" characters, usurers, gulls and fools, intriguers, courtesans, projectors, conventional lovers, fill his stage. Not only are these the conventional characters of the comedy of his generation, but they are presented in the most conventional manner. The comedy of "humours" emphasized one particular trait in a man; too often he seemed to be merely a personified trait, a quality behind which there was no life.

Coleridge is of the opinion that "Jonson's (characters) are either a man with a huge wen, having a circulation of its own, and which we might conceive amputated, and the patient thereby losing all his character; or they are mere wens themselves instead of men—wens personified, or with eyes, nose and mouth cut out, mandrake fashion."³⁹

This is true, not of all his characters, but of those distinctly "humorous." But the habit of drawing such characters, the method employed, had on his successors one very bad effect. They drew characters not "humorous" in the same narrow way. They seemed to lose the ability to present a full and many-sided character. In the "humorous" char-

³⁹ Coleridge: "Literary Remains," Vol. 2, p. 279. Ed. by H. N. Coleridge, London, 1836.

acter the point is, of course, in its being possessed by this "humor"; the sense of the incongruous is at once appealed to; the man's unconscious blindness to many evils of life, his sensitiveness to whatever touches that one side,—these give us food for laughter and for thought. We usually assume for the man enough qualities to make him human. We feel that the author did not clearly show other sides to the character, because he was so interested in the one and wished to make it very distinct. In the case of a character which is not humorous but is sketched in the same way—shown only on one side—this is not true. We cannot conceive any absorption on the part of the author sufficient to explain it; we feel that he has shown little because there was no more to be shown. This does not hold true of servants and very minor figures who appear so little or in so restricted a role that they could not be expected to show what they really are.

Hazlitt gives us a partial explanation of this. He says that in comedy, "The springs of nature, passion or imagination are but feebly touched. The impressions appealed to, and with masterly address, are habitual, external and conventional advantages: the ideas of birth, of fortune, of connexions, of dress, accomplishment, fashion, the opinion of the world, of crowds of admirers, continually come into play, flatter our vanity, bribe our interest, soothe our indolence, fall in with our prejudices; it is these that support the goddess of our idolatry, with which she is everything. The mere fine lady of comedy compared with the heroine of romance or poetry, when stripped of her adventitious ornaments and advantages, is too much like the doll stripped of its finery. In thinking of *Millamant*, we think almost as much of her dress as of her person."⁴⁰

His choice of *Millamant* as an illustration is significant, for his statements apply much more fully and exactly to Restoration drama than to any other. It is far less applicable to

⁴⁰ William Hazlitt: "English Comic Writers," p. 141.

the comedy of intrigue, of "humorous," of domestic or bourgeois life; while it plainly does not at all apply to the more serious romantic comedy. It does explain, to quite a degree, the appeal made, the effect produced by Brome's plays. They impress one as external,—as picturing the outside of life, its follies and fashions; the outside of character, its passing whims and fancies, its action and appearance in the tavern, the drawing-room, the public pleasure resort.

While a certain amount of superficiality and externality is always to be expected in comedy, especially as compared with tragedy, it does not follow that comedy cannot or should not have characters complex and powerful. Volpone,⁴¹ Subtle,⁴² Sir Epicure Mammon,⁴² Sir Giles Overreach,⁴³ show that comedy can have figures of the utmost power and interest. If we judge by the history of the drama it seems certain that comedy of the highest class, of the kind that continues to appeal, must have some characters of this nature. The comedy of intrigue and externals, though here one is compelled to speak with caution, hardly seems lasting. It seems clear that even the rather shallow belles and beaux of the Restoration comedy produced, and still produce, at least the illusion of a fairly complex and varied personality. They were certainly far from being merely automata in a skilfully played game. Because this seems to me to be true I feel that Brome's treatment of character is a very great and almost fatal defect—is responsible in large measure for the emptiness of the plays.

Mr. J. S. Symonds states the case very fairly: "The characters are defined with a coarse outline and a hard rigidity that betray the artifice of their construction. They are not persons so much as tricks and humours, noted for their effective salience by the author, and invested with a semblance

⁴¹ Jonson's "Volpone."

⁴² In Jonson's "The Alchemist."

⁴³ In Massinger's "A New Way to Pay Old Debts."

of individuality.”⁴⁴ He is right, too, in viewing this as a main reason for “that barren unreality which is so tedious in Brome.”

Not all of Brome’s characters merit such a description. Justice Clack⁴⁵ with his oft-repeated question, “Nay, if we both speak together, how shall we hear one another?” is a creation and a most amusing one. Constance, the “Northern Lass” who was considered at the time a most pathetic figure, has not wholly lost her charm, though far too obviously reminiscent of Ophelia. Two characters not wholly commonplace can hardly save two hundred.

Brome’s tendency toward the commonplace and the vulgar is shown both in the characters he chooses and in his plots and incidents. To quote Mr. Symonds once more: “His view of the world is that of a groom, rather than of a gentleman; and the scenes and characters which he depicts are drawn from the experience of a flunkey.”

Courtesans, real or supposed, are conspicuous in many of the plays; but neither in manners or morals do they seem much below the other female characters,—not at all below the major portion of the male characters. The pronounced contempt for the virtuous city man, an anticipation of the attitude of the Restoration writers of comedy toward the same class, is made more conspicuous by the partiality shown to the man who wrongs him, and to almost all the gay and gross young profligates who form so prominent a part of many of his *Dramatis Personae*.

The coarseness of speech common at the time would be looked for; incidental scenes immoral in suggestion would not be surprising in realistic comedy. The former is ever present; the latter is not so frequent, because in some plays the immorality is not incidental but fundamental, while in

⁴⁴ J. A. Symonds: *The Academy*, Mar. 21 1874. “A Review of Brome’s Plays” in the three volume edition of 1873.

⁴⁵ In “The Jovial Crew.”

others it is absent. It can hardly be said that scenes of this kind are introduced merely because they are coarse or immoral, in order to gratify an audience hungering for the unclean. They are there because the author felt at home in a society where they were common and, since his auditors enjoyed them, saw no reason why he should not use such material. A proof that the atmosphere of such plays as "A Mad Couple," "The Court Beggar" and "The City Wit," with its mixture of frank and insinuated immorality, is his natural air, is to be seen in the nature of the plays where it is absent. "The Love-Sick Court" and "The Queen and the Concubine" have on the whole the whitest pages. They are romantic dramas. The atmosphere of romance and idealism in which the better romantic comedies had moved had been felt to be incompatible with coarseness or any conspicuous immorality. To this feeling Brome pays a measure of deference; but because such restraint was irksome to him or because he knew imperfectly the life of virtuous men and women of the higher social class, probably for both these reasons, these plays show a stiffness unknown to his more realistic and coarser plays.

The characters seem not only narrow but remote and impossible; we feel a constantly obtruding skepticism as to their being flesh and blood. The air is rare and cold. The dialogue is stiff and conventional. In both plays the real and true part of the play is the comic episodes, which here are quite sharply separated from the main, serious action.

Brome pays a peculiar tribute to the sense of decency in his audience, or to tradition, in many plays, while at the same time he attempts to win the rewards given to the writer unblushingly immoral. He carefully arranges a situation supposed by part of the characters, perhaps,—as in "The Spargus Garden" by the audience,—to be thoroughly indecent but which proves at last harmless. The central situation of "The Novella," "The Damselle" and "The New Academy"

is of this kind. Time after time a character or situation is saved by the merest accident.

The coarseness of the stews appears in the trick which Victoria plays on Pantaloni⁴⁶ and in the punishment which Lady Strangelove prepares to mete out to the treacherous doctor in a scene of sickening realism.⁴⁷ These scenes are the contrivance of women whom the author plainly considers heroines and ladies of the highest character, with at least as much delicacy as was the usual possession of well-bred ladies of the upper middle class.

Women who, like Milicent⁴⁸ and Constance,⁴⁹ are deeply and sincerely regardful of their honor, are considered a little odd and queer. A woman's chastity is usually regarded as a merely material thing. Sexual morality in men is the exception rather than the rule, and is considered unnecessary and quixotic. Perhaps the strangest thing to modern ears is the constant jesting in regard to woman's honor, not only among the men but among the women and in mixed company. It is not the jesting of girls who do not fully comprehend the terms they use, it is in the talk of mature women of position and experience.

"A Mad Couple Well Matched" shows us in Careless, the hero, a young man most debauched and dissolute, who never really repents of his evil ways, but is at last married, almost against his will, to a rich widow who frankly concedes that his licentiousness has won her love. "The Mad Couple" are an old gentleman and his wife, much younger than he. He confesses that he has been unfaithful. His wife, who is pictured as a model of womanhood, seems neither surprised, angry, nor sorrowful. Her only emotion is anger when she discovers that he has been financially imposed upon. This

⁴⁶ In "The Novella."

⁴⁷ In "The Court Beggar," Act 4, Sc. 2.

⁴⁸ In "The English Moor."

⁴⁹ In "The Northern Lass."

model of virtue forces Careless, who is willing enough, to refuse reparation to the woman he has wronged. The parallel action between Lovely and Mrs. Alicia Saleware culminates in a scene quite indescribably vicious. Saleware is the only character who escapes with the slightest shred of honor or decency, and he is a miserable fool.

No intellectual brilliancy of epigram or dialogue, no poetic beauty, allows or invites us to somewhat disregard the vulgar details. The hard realism of the treatment forces them to our notice, the constant allusions and the subjects of conversation lead us to expect them.

The most significant and unpleasant feature of the play, viewed from a moral standpoint, is the fact that all of the characters, differing as they do in position, and in many points of character, look at morality from the same low point of view. No high ideal is suggested,—apparently the characters have never thought of such a thing. One feels that they would be scoffingly skeptical if it were suggested. True, some of the women are chaste, but this appears to be a matter rather of chance or of calculation than of principle. Such views are not unknown today, but their brutal expression as a prevalent feature of society appears to be confined to certain unfortunate classes of society. There is, too, even in such social groups a consciousness of higher things. As depicted in such a play as "A Mad Couple" this low view of things moral was universal,—the lower social class show it no more and no less definitely than the higher; occupation, sex, age or birth make little apparent difference.

"A Mad Couple" illustrates this view of life more clearly than any other play, but all show it directly or indirectly. In some the plot or some other matter makes it less conspicuous. In some, as has been said, it is practically absent; but the artificial nature of those plays leads one to believe that the moral atmosphere, too, was an imitation,—something which

Brome thought, very rightly, to be a necessity to that sort of play, but which came with the form, not from the author.

This attitude, seen in occasional plays by Brome's predecessors and contemporaries, is not, I think, the characteristic one with any of his most productive predecessors, with the possible exception of Middleton. It is plain in such works as "The Hollander,"⁵⁰ "The Jealous Lovers,"⁵¹ "Holland's Leaguer,"⁵² written by contemporaries who left no great amount of work. It is noticeable that plays of this nature were more and more produced as those of a higher kind appeared less and less commonly,—that the former flourished as the latter decayed.

The stern judicial attitude which Jonson assumed toward his characters we would expect to see in Brome; and, in truth, he does try to follow his master here, but his occasional lapses and, especially, the half-hearted and forced character of his judgments show that he was not vitally interested in the judicial functions he thought it necessary to assume. The usurers are, of course, always sternly dealt with, the gulls made openly ridiculous, the "humorous" are sometimes cured of their humor; but the graceful young scapegrace, male or female, is cleverly rescued from the consequences of folly or of crime, or is shown to be less black than anyone had supposed. Sometimes a villain, such as Carless⁵³ or Sir Ferdinand,⁵⁴ is rewarded for his evil ways.

He cannot, like Shakespeare, present the situation and the characters without criticism, with little or no comment; he will not, like Congreve, stand aloof in genial tolerance; but he fails to follow his apparent principle in any consistent way, and appears vacillating and irresolute. The basis of his decisions, too, is a shifting one." Sometimes he decides from

⁵⁰ "The Hollander," by Henry Glapthorne.

⁵¹ "The Jealous Lovers," by Thomas Randolph.

⁵² "Holland's Leaguer," by Shackerley Marmion.

⁵³ In "A Mad Couple."

⁵⁴ In "The Court Beggar."

the most practical considerations, again from intellectual ones, at other times from moral ones. The practical consideration seems the one he most naturally and easily follows; in the moral world he seems least at home.

The judicial way of looking at things, assumed largely as a matter of form, grounded on views far from high, and uncertain in their application, makes more rather than less apparent the essential emptiness of these plays.

This clear lack of any strong and real principles or ideals, the frequent immorality, the lack of any great, true, or deeply human characters,—these taken together explain why his plays seem without content. This lack of content forces into high relief his technical skill; we admire it because there is little else to admire. But the very fact that the servant has become the master, that that which should be subordinate is almost supreme, is condemnation; it shows that the dramatic time is out of joint. This fact, true of Brome alone, would be interesting; true of his contemporaries, it is significant. Whatever value these plays may have is, nevertheless, mainly due to the fact that they show this fact so fully.

We have shown or attempted to show, that the most conspicuous features of dramatic decadence are eclecticism, immorality, absorptive imitation, strain or forced "originality," and over-devotion to technique; and that the comedies of Richard Brome show, in greater or less degree, all these qualities, and may be justly said to illustrate dramatic decadence.

